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This Is Only a Game, But...

This just in from Washington... The White House says U.S. Navy planes have attacked and destroyed several Russian ships in Havana harbor and crippled a Soviet sub discovered off the coast of Nicaragua... Pentagon sources confirm that spy satellites have, in fact, spotted nuclear medium-range missiles in Cuba... The Russian news agency Tass has just announced that an American F-16 fighter-bomber carrying nuclear weapons was shot down over Cuba by Soviet Cuban-based missiles... While the president was meeting with Defense Department officials, Russian troops in Cuba launched an air and missile attack against the U.S. naval base in Panama. Details are sketchy but preliminary reports indicate that nuclear weapons were used... Here in Miami's northern suburbs, the word is bedlam... There is no order to evacuate; however, people are leaving anyway in droves...

Casual listeners to radio station KFRC in San Francisco could be forgiven a touch of panic in recent weeks after hearing taut "news bulletins" suggesting the onset of Armageddon. In fact, it was part of a new audience-participation game called FIREBREAKS—created and distributed by Ground Zero, the Washington-based educational group, to demonstrate just how easily decision makers can blunder on to what Ground Zero founder Roger Molander calls "the slippery slope to nuclear war."

For many nuclear-age players, FIREBREAKS has megatons more appeal than Monopoly. By last week, the \$10 game had been played by about 150,000 individuals at 4,500 high schools, colleges, churches and community groups

from Appalachia to Alaska. Participants are divided into teams of advisers to U.S. and Soviet leaders, with some playing specific roles such as CIA director or Kremlin defense minister. They must vote on various policy options in a scenario of rising U.S.-Soviet conflict in Eastern Europe and Central America—with hostilities between India and Pakistan and a nuclear "warning" explosion by Pakistan thrown in for good measure. Developed by former National Security Council staffer Molander and a team of experts, FIREBREAKS comes complete with team badges, briefing papers, charts, maps and a newspaper front page whose headline reads: SUPERPOWERS STAND AT BRINK OF ALL-OUT WAR.

All the verisimilitude has produced some very troubling results. Student players have opted overwhelmingly (80 percent) for military solutions—with about half choosing either strategic or battlefield nuclear weapons.

"I feel we have no option; this is a crisis—we must strike first," sobbed one woman who called the KFRC studio, where Molander's brother Earl, a student of Russian strategy, was ensconced. At Ground Zero headquarters, Molander was a bit depressed. "It's sobering to think that so many young people feel that their leaders would use nuclear weapons," he said. "Clearly we need to educate people." Indeed, the game is designed to focus attention on the "firebreaks" that could help prevent escalation into all-out war: arms control, better communications between U.S. and Soviet leaders and improved international mediation. Wrote one seventh-grade participant, Debby Kuntz: "Preventing nuclear war isn't as easy as it seems."

FIREBREAKS



Earl Molander at KFRC: Nuclear options

DAVID M. ALPERN with
GERALD C. LUBENOW in San Francisco
and MARY LORD in Washington